

Logging expansion won't help rural communities: Guest opinion

Updated June 29, 2014 at 1:41 PM; Posted June 29, 2014 at 1:40 PM

logging.JPG

This 2011 file photo shows dense forest on a steep slope on U.S. Bureau of Land Management land outside Ruch, Ore. *(AP Photo/Jeff Barnard)*
Comment

By [Guest Columnist](#)

By **Ernie Niemi and John Kober**

Rural Oregon's economic woes are significant. And unfortunately, many social services, including public safety, are suffering as a result. But we disagree with reporter Les Zaitz [when he writes](#), "The virtual end of federal logging is the main culprit."

Many, more powerful factors besides the decline in logging on federal lands in the 1990s underlie these problems. One is the timber industry's assault on workers. The industry busted the unions and cut jobs before and after the timber wars of the 1990s. In the 1990s, Forest Service economists estimate that federal logging reductions accounted for only one-third of the industry's job losses; the rest came from corporate decisions to eliminate jobs. The industry also reduced wages, both before and after the 1990s. It once paid 30-40 percent more than the statewide average wage, but now pays the same or less than the average.

The industry hurts rural communities even further by exporting logs. While exports from federal lands are banned, timber industry exports over all have increased from one out of every 10 logs at the beginning of the 21st century to one of every five logs more recently – exporting sawmill jobs along with them.

The industry also has directly grabbed from county coffers money that could support public safety and other social services. Timber companies operating in Oregon used to pay timber-harvest taxes similar to what they paid in Washington and California. They don't now. In 1993, using the spotted owl as an excuse, their lobbyists convinced the Oregon Legislature to phase out the tax. They still pay it in California and Washington, and many companies operate profitably in all three states. If Oregon had a similar tax, it would have provided counties in western Oregon about \$40 million in 2011.

Increased logging on federal lands will not fix these problems. Instead, it will diminish jobs in one of Oregon's fastest growing industries, outdoor recreation. The outdoor recreation industry employs about 140,000 workers in Oregon (logging and wood-products manufacturing employ fewer than 30,000). Nationally, jobs in outdoor recreation are growing 5 percent annually. High-quality recreation attracts middle- and high-income families to settle in rural counties, too, boosting local economic activity. There is abundant research and data showing that our federal forests would do far more for workers, families and local businesses if managed for ecosystem and human health rather than as tree farms.

Yes, rural economies are suffering. But reduced logging on federal lands is not even close to being the main culprit. We have been working with elected officials, federal land managers, counties and timber industry leaders to find solutions that create a future where our public forests provide sustainable timber, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife, and lucrative outdoor recreational opportunities – thus making the greatest possible contribution possible to the well-being of Oregon's families and communities.

Ernie Niemi is the president of Natural Resource Economics, Inc., and John Kober is the executive director of the Pacific Rivers Council.